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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 006998

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PK](#) [IZ](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: JASWANT IN THE WILDERNESS

Classified By: Ambassador David Mulford, Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

11. (C) Summary: In a warm and constructive November 1 discussion with the Ambassador, Parliamentary Opposition Leader Jaswant Singh reaffirmed his commitment to the US-India relationship, remarking that "I have paid a political price for my support of better relations" between New Delhi and Washington, "but I will continue to do so because it's the right thing for India." Not surprisingly, Jaswant was highly critical of Congress' performance in government, arguing that Manmohan Singh did not have the stature or temperament to hold together a multi-party coalition as Vajpayee did. Jaswant cautioned that suggestions the BJP should support the UPA's efforts to continue economic reform were undercut by the "personal vendetta" that some in the Congress have been conducting. The former Foreign Minister was typically downbeat about US policy in Pakistan, complaining that Washington had granted President Musharraf "a veto" over the US-India relationship. On Iraq, Jaswant worried about the prospect of partition along ethnic and religious lines. End Summary.

12. (C) Reviving a relationship that began when Jaswant Singh was Finance Minister, the Ambassador, joined by PolCouns, called on the Rajya Sabha Opposition Leader at his New Delhi residence on November 1. Jaswant was completely at ease in his role as an opposition politician, remarking wistfully on his official residence "in the servants' quarters" of the Prime Minister's compound. Jaswant made only a passing reference to the recent controversy over the Secretary's description of the US role in helping to sustain efforts at Indo-Pak diplomacy in April 2003. He recalled that Vajpayee had made three major efforts at rapprochement with Pakistan -- at Lahore (1999), Agra (2001) and Srinagar (2003). In each instance, he argued, the only driver was the Prime Minister's personal resolve to make peace with Pakistan his lasting legacy. Without going into details, Jaswant expressed concern that President Musharraf and the Pakistani leadership have still not made the strategic decision to abandon hostility to India.

US-India

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13. (C) On the broader US-India relationship, Jaswant was unequivocal, recalling how he and the Prime Minister resolved between themselves to make relations with Washington an NDA priority. "I have paid a political price for my support of better relations" between New Delhi and Washington, Jaswant declared, joking that he had been labeled as a "CIA agent" within the NDA. He declared that "I will continue (this support for US-India partnership) because it's the right thing for India." Jaswant was completely gracious in his recollection of his early meetings with Bush Administration officials, describing in detail how touched he had been by the time that the President spent with him during his May 2001 visit to Washington. Echoing remarks he made earlier this year to former Deputy Secretary Talbott (and recounted in Talbott's memoirs), Jaswant offered a long soliloquy on the unfulfilled potential of the US-India relations. He lamented that "Musharraf has been given a veto" over the pace of US-India relations, and complained that the war in Iraq and our respective election cycles have left both Washington and New Delhi too distracted to focus on our bilateral agenda.

Arc of Crisis

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14. (C) The Ambassador cited the NSSP as evidence of Washington's commitment to the India relationship and challenged Jaswant's implication that Iraq was less than an urgent challenge to international security, which promoted the former Foreign Minister to back track from his comments. However, after acknowledging that policy makers must work with the world as they find it, Jaswant added that he is gravely concerned about the prospect that Iraq will fracture along ethnic and religious lines. Pulling from his library a well thumbed copy of David Fromkin's "Peace to End All Peace," Jaswant cited the British legacy in the Middle East as the root of the region's current tumult, reiterating concern that an artificially drawn Iraq would eventually splinter.

15. (C) Jaswant stayed in his Dickensian mode as the conversation turned to Afghanistan, arguing that despite surface appearances the situation there remained fragile. He

pointed to Karzai's US protection detail as an error of US tactics that created an image deeply offensive to Karzai's Pashtun constituency. Drawing on his experience negotiating with Kabul for the release of a hijacked Indian airliner, Jaswant counseled against any compromise with the Taliban.

16. (C) On Pakistan, Jaswant recounted the "sad history" of US engagement with Islamabad to argue that sooner or later India will be "presented with the bill" for the GOP's current cooperation with Washington in the war on terrorism. As in the 1980's, he argued, the United States will eventually find itself at a dead end with its Pakistan policy.

Whither Reform?  
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17. (C) Jaswant's enthusiastic interventions on foreign policy betrayed his preference for that dimension of his several previous portfolios. But the former Finance and Defense Minister also spoke with authority on issues of governance in India. Jaswant cautioned that the US might want to "aim off" of (discount) his remarks on Congress, since he speaks now as a leader of the opposition bench. With that caveat, Jaswant criticized Manmohan Singh for lacking the stature or temperament to hold together a multi-party coalition as Vajpayee did. He called the Home Minister "a disaster," described how Pranab Mukherjee had privately acknowledged that he knew nothing about the Defense portfolio, implied that Foreign Minister Natwar Singh had already been stripped of most authority by the PMO, and generally excoriated the UPA government.

18. (C) Queried about the BJP's approach to economic issues now that they are back in opposition, Jaswant argued that Congress' "personal vendetta" against the BJP and other NDA alliance members made it difficult for people like him who would be inclined to support the government's effort to sustain the process of reform. He implied that the BJP at least for now will be a relentless opposition, taking advantage of Congress missteps and contradictions with the Left to score easy political points. He was silent on questions of BJP leadership, and the struggle between Hindu hard liners and moderates like himself who recognize that a middle course is essential to the BJP's hopes for returning to power.

MULFORD